



DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY SECRETARY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20250

April 16, 2002

The Honorable Sam Brownback
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Brownback:

I am writing in response to your letter regarding J-1 Visa waivers and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's recent decision regarding our role in the program. First, let me assure you that the Bush Administration is committed to providing health care opportunities to all Americans, including those in rural areas. And, we understand the importance of recruiting and retaining physicians in those areas.

USDA has served as an Interested Government Agency (IGA) for the past eight years for foreign medical doctors. As an IGA, we recommended waivers of the requirement that these doctors return home after their medical training for two years before returning to the United States to practice primary care medicine in medically under-served rural areas of the U.S.

After September 11, 2001, we undertook a comprehensive review of all our programs to identify potential vulnerabilities. This included, among many things, USDA's role in the J-1 Visa waiver sponsorship program. Our review showed that USDA did not have the ability to effectively conduct background checks of the applicants. Because of the emphasis on national security, we felt that was an important part of the program. Until a resolution on this issue could be developed, we withdrew our participation in the program.

Since then, we have worked with other federal agencies to address concerns regarding this program. As a result, we have developed the following new steps to process the pending 86 applications for IGA sponsorship. First, USDA will act as a temporary IGA to process the remaining applications for consideration. Second, prior to sponsoring a candidate, USDA will receive from the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of State a review of that specific individual to ensure the candidate meets the appropriate criteria, including security concerns, pertinent to the alien's admissibility to the U.S. In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will assist USDA by verifying the doctor's credentials, verifying the facility at which he or she is to serve, confirming that the criteria for the waiver are met, and conducting periodic monitoring to assure that the service is being provided as proposed.

The Administration remains committed to ensuring that, to the maximum extent possible, physicians are available to provide service to medically under served areas. J-1 Visa participants can help meet these needs. For that reason, the White House has formed an interagency task force to review the J-1 visa program for foreign physicians. We hope this addresses the concerns expressed in your letter and look forward to working with you on this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "James R. Moseley", written in a cursive style.

James R. Moseley
Deputy Secretary